SPORT

Asif, Asjad dominate as Hasnain splits matches at IBSF World Cup

MUSCAT: Pakistan cueist Mohammad Asif delivered two commanding performances, while Asjad Iqbal also kept his record perfect but teenage compatriot Mohammad Hasnain Akhtar had a mixed day as the IBSF Snooker World Cup continued on Sunday.

The 43-year-old Asif began his campaign with a straightforward 3-0 (78-38, 73-06, 89-19) victory over Indonesia's Gebby Putra. He followed this with another dominant 3-0 win against local hope Qasim Albalushi of Oman, opening the match with a 52 break in an 80-1 first frame, and closing it with a 60 break in an 83-3 final frame.

Hasnain, 16, started strongly with a 3-0 win over Samer Althaher of Jordan. He opened with a 60 break to take the first frame 69-0, sealed a second whitewash frame 80-0 and won the third 67-6.

However, the teenager later fell 3-1 to Iranian player Ali Gharahgozlou. Gharahgozlou took the first frame 71-27 with a 52 break, but Hasnain levelled the match by winning the second frame 74-1 with a 74 break. Gharahgozlou then fired a 96 break to take the third frame 96-4 and clinched the match by winning a tight fourth frame 61-47.

In other action, the 2024 national champion, Asjad eased past Luxembourg's Fred Wagner 3-0 [74-32, 83-7(74), 124-14(62)].—Agencies

VALENCIA: Aprilia Racing team's Italian rider Marco Bezzecchi competes ahead of BK8 Gresini Racing Alex Marquez of Spain during the Valencia Grand Prix at the Ricardo Tormo racetrack on Sunday. Bezzecchi won the race to bring the season to a close. The 27-year-old sealed third place in the championship in the sprint on Saturday. The Italian's third place also gave Aprilia their first top-three championship finish. Marc Marquez had already sealed the title in September, his brother Alex going on to seal second place overall in October.—AFP

PORTO: Portugal's Goncalo Ramos scores during the 2026 World Cup qualifier against Armenia at the Dragao Stadium on Sunday.—AFP

Portugal qualify for 2026 World Cup as Ireland book playoff spot

PORTO: Portugal crushed Armenia 9-1 to clinch qualification for the 2026 World Cup finals on Sunday, while a 96th-minute Troy Parrott goal to complete his hat-trick booked Ireland a spot in the playoffs.

Portugal were playing without suspended Cristiano Ronaldo but they didn't missed their talisman as Bruno Fernandes and Joao Neves both scored hat-tricks to register a huge win in Porto to top Group 'F'.

Renato Veiga got the ball rolling for Portugal, with Goncalo Ramos and Francisco Conceicao also on the scoresheet.

After a draw in Hungary in October and a surprise defeat at Ireland on Thursday in which Ronaldo was sent off, Portugal wrapped up qualification at the third attempt in their final group match.

They will compete in a seventh consecutive edition of the World Cup, a tournament which the Euro 2016 champions are yet to win.

Meanwhile, Ireland stunned Hungary with a late winner to triumph 3-2 in the other Group 'F' match and reach the play-offs, with Parrott following up his midweek brace against Portugal with a hat-trick.

Higher-ranked Hungary just needed a draw to secure second place and led 2-1 at halftime thanks to goals from Daniel Lukacs and Barnabas Varga, but Parrott's second goal of the night on 80 minutes and last-gasp winner broke the home side's hearts.

Hungary, who unlike Ireland have made the finals of the last three European championships, got off to the perfect start when Lukacs flicked in a Dominik Szoboszlai short corner on four minutes, only for Parrott to equalise from the penalty spot on 15 minutes.

Caoimhin Kelleher kept the sides level with a fine close range save from Roland Sallai but could do nothing on 37 minutes when striker Barnabas Varga chested the ball down with his back to goal just outside the box, swivelled and unleashed a stunning left-foot half volley into the top corner.

Ireland had set up the tense finale with a shock win over group winners Portugal and looked out of gas until Parrott, their hero from Thursday night, broke through to equalise again with 10 minutes to go and stabbed home his fifth goal in two games.

He was mobbed by exultant team-mates and substitutes.

Parrott had described his double in Thursday's shock 2-0 win over Portugal that set up the dramatic finale as the best night of his life and was in tears after Sunday topped that.

"This is why we love football because things like this can happen. I love where I'm from, so this means the world to me," the AZ Alkmaar striker told national broadcaster RTE shortly after embracing his family in the stands.

"This is the first time I've cried in years... It's a fairytale, you can't even dream about something like that."

SPAIN, SWITZERLAND ON BRINK

On Saturday, Spain all but mathematically booked their ticket to the World Cup with a 4-0 thrashing of Georgia, with Turkey delaying their celebrations by edging Bulgaria 2-0.

Kosovo likewise prevented Switzerland from booking their spot in North America next year, beating Slovenia 2-0 to prolong the Group 'B' suspense for another three days.

Switzerland's 4-1 win over Sweden, though, means that only an unlikely thrashing in Kosovo on Tuesday could prevent them from progressing.

Elsewhere, a brace by Marko Arnautovic fired Austria to a 2-0 win away to Cyprus that nudged them closer to World Cup qualification for the first time since 1998.

But Bosnia-Hercegovina came from behind to beat 10-man Romania 3-1 and ensure Group 'H' goes down to the wire too.

Belgium missed the chance to secure their spot at the finals after they were held to a 1-1 draw in Kazakhstan.

In Tbilisi, Mikel Oyarzabal bagged a brace while Martin Zubimendi and Ferran Torres scored a goal each as Spain maintained their perfect qualification record by outclassing Georgia.

That commanding victory left Spain with a three-point lead over Turkey at the top of Group 'E' and a vastly superior goal difference.

Turkey would have to pull off a stunning seven-goal victory away to Spain on Tuesday to pip La Roja to automatic World Cup qualification.

At Bursa, Hakan Calhanoglu gave Turkey the lead from the penalty spot on 18 minutes while Atanas Chernev bundled a cross past his own goalkeeper Dimitar Mitov seven minutes from time to give hosts a laboured win.

Meanwhile, Granit Xhaka scored a penalty as Switzerland all but secured their spot in the finals.

Sweden's Benjamin Nygren equalised Breel Embolo's opener but after Xhaka restored the hosts' lead, further goals from Dan Ndoye and Johan Manzambi added gloss to the victory.

Kosovo, though, will need to beat Switzerland 6-0 on Tuesday to snatch the automatic qualifying spot away from them.

Veteran Edin Dzeko scored his 72nd international goal as Bosnia prevented Austria from securing qualification by hitting back from a goal down to beat Romania.

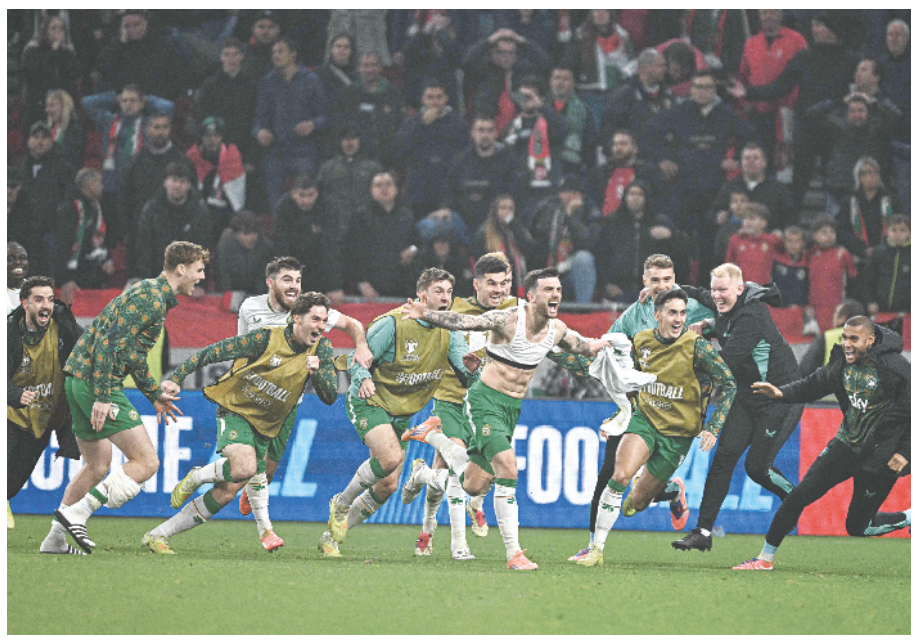
But Bosnia will need to win away to Austria on Tuesday to pip them to top spot in Group 'H'.

Belgium's qualification hopes have gone down to the wire after they failed to beat Kazakhstan, although with a home tie against Liechtenstein — who have lost all their matches so far — to come, they should comfortably secure that.

They remain top of Group 'J' with 15 points, two ahead of both North Macedonia and Wales, who won 1-0 away to Liechtenstein to keep their automatic qualification hopes alive.

Denmark pulled a point clear of Scotland in Group 'C' ahead of their crunch clash in Glasgow on Tuesday after being held to a surprise 2-2 draw at home to Belarus.

Scotland fell to a 3-2 defeat in Greece. The hosts had opened up a 3-0 lead after Scotland missed a host of chances, but goals from Ryan Christie and Ben Doak threatened an unlikely comeback.—Agencies



BUDAPEST: Ireland's Troy Parrott (C) celebrates scoring the winner with team-mates during the match against Hungary at the Puskas Arena on Sunday.—AFP

Benn puts on masterclass in rematch win over Eubank Jr

LONDON: Conor Benn dominated Chris Eubank Jr for 12 rounds in their middleweight clash at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on Saturday to claim a unanimous decision victory, exacting revenge for his defeat in the pair's first meeting in April.

Benn lost that fight after all three judges scored it 116-112 in favour of his opponent, but there was no doubting who won Saturday's clash as the 29-year-old put on the most complete performance of his professional career over 36 minutes.

Similar to the first fight, Benn came out strongly in the opening rounds, coming in under his opponent's jab to land some heavy blows, but this time there was to be no fall-off in production as Eubank struggled from the opening bell.

Eubank looked to make his height and reach advantage tell midway through the third round, punishing Benn when he allowed his head to go over his front foot, but Benn's fast footwork allowed him to get in and out without suffering too much damage.

With Benn controlling the tempo, Eubank found himself forced to lock his opponent up in the clinch to avoid damage when his guard was breached.

Sensing his adversary beginning to tire, Benn stepped on the gas in the seventh round, launching savage shots to the body to slow him down even further. Eubank Jr tried to respond, but there was little malice in his usually potent jab until he finally landed some offense late in the eighth round.

That was to be as good as it got for Eubank and Benn went for broke in the final frame, knocking his opponent to the canvas twice, with the bell coming to Eubank's rescue at the end of another epic clash between the two British boxers.

With the two boxers' fathers engaging in a heated rivalry in the 1990s that echoed in their sons' two 2025 clashes, Benn recorded his family's first victory over the Eubanks and quickly drew a line under it, saying there would be no re-match.

"I feel like this is the end of the Benn-Eubank saga. Done. Finished. It's over ... this ends here," he said, before taking a swipe at his detractors and praising Eubank Jr.

"Everyone's saying, I can't box? Put that in your pipe and smoke it ... credit to Chris man, that's all I say. Thank you for sharing the ring with me."

For his part, Eubank was gracious in defeat, giving no excuses for his flat performance and hailing his opponent as the better man.

"I've been through hell and back to get to this night, and it is what it is. I tried my best, and listen, the kid fought hard. He fought tough. He's got power," he said. "Who knows, maybe we will see something new between me and him and maybe we won't, but for right now, it's all about this man. It's his night."—Reuters

BRITAIN'S Conor Benn knocks down compatriot Chris Eubank Jr during their middleweight fight at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.—Reuters

Stars, Invincibles return to winning ways

LAHORE: Stars and Invincibles returned to winning ways in the second round of the National Women's One-day Tournament after both sides had opened their campaigns with defeats. The matches were played at the HPC Ground and Iqbal Stadium in Faisalabad on Sunday.

At the HPC Ground, left-arm spinner Anam Amin delivered a decisive spell, returning figures of 5-34 in 8.2 overs to bowl Challengers out for 150 in 37.2 overs, handing Stars a 37-run victory. Chasing 188, Challengers appeared firmly in control at 101-2 before collapsing dramatically, losing their last eight wickets for just 49 runs.

Opener Sadaf Shamas was the lone standout, falling agonisingly short of a century with 95 off 127 balls, striking eight fours and three sixes. She had put on 89 for the third wicket with Huraina Sajjad (32 off 43), but found little support thereafter as the middle order crumbled.

Stars were earlier lifted by an all-round performance from Syeda Aroob Shah, who scored 42 off 47 balls — hitting five fours and a six — before picking up 2-20 in six overs. Sidra Amin contributed a steady 40 off 56, while openers Gull Rukh (24) and Omaima Sohail (16) provided a 30-run start.

For Challengers, Aleena Shah, Rameen Shamim and Neha Sharmin Nadeem claimed two wickets apiece.

At the Iqbal Stadium, Invincibles eased past Strikers by eight wickets, securing the modest 113-run target with 175 balls to spare.

After choosing to bat, Strikers moved to 58-2 before a middle-order slide saw them dismissed for 112. Aliya Riaz top-scored with 31 off 59, while Invincibles' bowling was spearheaded by Momina Riasat and Tasmia Rubab, who took three wickets each. Tuba Hassan and Neelam Mushtaq chipped in with two apiece.

Invincibles' chase was anchored by a commanding knock from Muneeba Ali, who struck 80 off 69 balls, laced with 14 fours and a six. She shared a 103-run stand with Dua Majid (28 not out), ensuring a comfortable finish.—Agencies

Alcaraz and Sinner set up inevitable ATP Finals decider

TURIN: World number one Carlos Alcaraz eased to a 6-2, 6-4 win over Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime at the ATP Finals on Saturday to set up a highly-anticipated title decider with defending champion Jannik Sinner.

The Italian second seed defeated Alex de Minaur in the other semi-final.

Alcaraz overcame Auger-Aliassime's spirited resistance by breaking twice in the opening set and nerves appeared to hit the Canadian when serving at 5-4 down in the second as four unforced errors gifted the Spaniard the game, set and match.

Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime plays a return against Carlos Alcaraz of Spain during their ATP Finals semi-final.—AFP

Sinner and Alcaraz will go head-to-head in their sixth title decider this year when they return to the Inalpi Arena for final where the 22-year-old Spaniard will bid to win his first title at the season-ending tournament.

The Italian will be playing in his third successive final in Turin, where Sinner has not dropped a set since losing the 2023 decider to Novak Djokovic.

The final has extra spice due to Alcaraz pipping Sinner to the top spot in the men's rankings at the end of 2025 and him contesting his 11th final of the season in front of a partisan Italian crowd."Facing Jannik with his home crowd on an indoor court is one of the most difficult challenges in our sport right now," Alcaraz said.

"I hope I have three or four people in the crowd cheering for me, I have my friends."

Auger-Aliassime saved three break points in his first service game, but was merely delaying the inevitable with Alcaraz able to turn on the style at will. The Spaniard broke to lead 3-1 and wrapped up the opening set by breaking to love.

Alcaraz seized the first break with a touch of brilliance. After Auger-Aliassime chased down a wicked drop shot, Alcaraz reached full-stretch to stab a volley into the open court, pumping his fists in celebration.

"I felt like I could do everything on court," Alcaraz said about his opening set performance. "It didn't matter if I did forehand down the line, drop shot or backhand down the line, I felt that everything was going to be in."

The Canadian, who managed to force a break point in the first set, hung in longer in the second.

However, it was a case of anything Auger-Aliassime could do, Alcaraz could do better.

The Spaniard held to love to lead 5-4 before the battling Auger-Aliassime collapsed under the pressure, leaving Alcaraz to race across the court to celebrate with his team.—Agencies